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Unfinished Chapter

The Second World War and the Holocaust

in Dutch Literature

On 10 May 1940 the Germans invaded the Netherlands. The Netherlands had tried in vain to avoid being involved in the Second World War by pursuing a policy of neutrality. There followed several days of heavy fighting. The royal family and the government withdrew to London and Rotterdam was bombed. The Netherlands capitulated on 15 May, and an occupation administration led by Seys-Inquart was imposed. At first, daily life continued more or less as normal, but gradually the German occupation tightened its grip and repression increased as Dutch society was organised along German lines. Artists and writers were forced to join the *Kultuurkamer* (Chamber of Culture) and those who did not were forbidden to publish their work or give performances. The reaction of the Dutch was mixed. A small group began an active resistance, of which the illegal press was a part. Another section of the population collaborated with the Germans. The title 'collaborator' hides a multitude of sins, ranging from treason through endorsement of fascist organisations, working for the Germans, to artists who – in order to survive – joined the Chamber of Cul-

The Second World War and the Holocaust are important themes in postwar Dutch literature, and form the main themes in the work of one particular group of writers. Interest in the theme of the Second World War has not diminished; literary works in which the war plays a role continue to be published, written by those who experienced the war and have only now begun to write. The so-called 'second generation', the children of victims, of the persecuted and of collaborators are writing about the war. Authors who were not personally involved have also chosen the war as a literary theme. In this article we shall discuss a number of well-known literary works from the Netherlands, taking literature in the broad sense: diaries and reminiscences as well as poetry, novels and stories. Flemish literature and literature dealing with the struggle in the Netherlands-Indies are outside the scope of this article.

In this literature, events which took place during and after the war are placed in a meaningful context. That context may be Christian, Jewish, communist, philosophical, humanist, national-socialist or psychological, or it may be that of personal myth or apparently objective realism. Within these contexts a trend is visible, one which shifts from positive to negative imagery, from the idealisation to the exposure of the resistance movement, from meaningful adaptation to relativisation. In the stories about the camps, the central theme is unspeakable suffering.

The Netherlands in wartime: resistance and collaboration

'It is the duty of every Dutch person to resist the Germans, however dangerous that may be.' Many resistance novels have been based on this thesis, among others those of Theun de Vries. In *The Girl with Red Hair* (Het meisje met het rode haar, 1956), De Vries portrays the law student Hanna Schaft, who joins a resistance group. Her heroism and patriotism is apparent in the way she carries out many dangerous missions, but shortly before liberation she is captured and executed. Hanna S. is the first-person narrator in the novel. She tells of her awakening communism and anti-fascism; she

ture. Resistance and collaboration have been referred to as being 'right' and 'wrong' respectively, but the sharp distinction expressed by those terms has subsequently been criticised. The majority of the population tried to make the best of the situation and, as far as possible, to lead normal lives. After September 1944 the South of the Netherlands was liberated by the Allies. It was not until 5 May 1945, after the hunger-winter in the west of the Netherlands, that the Germans capitulated and the rest of the country was liberated. Of all social groups the Jews suffered most. The implementation of German race laws isolated them and excluded them from everyday life until the deportations began in July 1942, which then continued until September 1943. The Jews were taken first to the transit camps of Westerbork and Vught, and from there to the extermination camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Sobibor or the internment camps at Bergen-Belsen or Theresienstadt. A small section of the Jewish population were able to save themselves by going into hiding. Of the 140,000 Dutch Jews, some 100,000 lost their lives.



Hendrik N. Werkman,
Prison Camp for Hostages,
St Michelsgestel II, 1942.

Hand printed, 65,5 x 50 cm.
Gemeentemuseum,
The Hague.

joins a workers' resistance group and falls in love with Hugo. After his death her resistance against the Germans intensifies. Her thoughts just before her execution reflect the central idea of the novel: *'There can be nothing in common between my murderers and myself (...) I die, but the spring and the sun remain untarnished. The Netherlands will be liberated. (...) I cry out to you. To everyone. The fascists extinguish my eyes and my breath, and my feet will remain in the beach grass.'* Her very last thought is 'I was a communist'. *The Girl with Red Hair* was made into a film in 1980, as many other war novels have been. The film, with its dull, grey-green tints, accurately reflects the atmosphere of war (as Egbert Barten pointed out in an essay on the Second World War in Dutch cinema). In the film, however, the political aspect is toned down while the theme of personal conflict is given more emphasis:

Hanna S. is not driven by political motives, but by emotions, and De Vries' emphasis on Hanna S. as a communist was omitted from the film. In *February. A Novel from the Occupation in 1941* (Februari, Roman uit het bezettingsjaar 1941, 1968), De Vries gives a detailed picture of the rising against the Germans in Amsterdam in February 1941, in protest against their first anti-Jewish activities. De Vries, himself a former member of the Resistance, puts the Resistance in a communist perspective with Hanna Schaft's anti-fascism and the role of the communist party in the February strike.

The Resistance is not the only subject to be treated. In *For a Lost Soldier* (Voor een verloren soldaat, 1986) Rudi van Dantzig paints an autobiographical picture of a young boy placed with a fisherman's family in the country during the war. The novel is at the same time a novel of war and of psychological development, relating how the boy Jeroen adapts to his new surroundings, how lonely he remains, and how, gradually, another boy from Amsterdam comes to occupy his daydreams and fantasies. A Canadian soldier seduces Jeroen during the liberation. The novel closes with his confused feelings of shame and desire, a problematic return to his parents, an anxious search for the soldier in newly-liberated Amsterdam, and the subsequent suppression of his homo-erotic experiences.

Literature sometimes questions the idea of a universal Dutch resistance to the Germans during the Second World War. The most important examples are *Pastorale 1943. A Novel from the Time of the German Occupation* (Pastorale 1943. Roman uit de tijd van de Duitse overheersing, 1948) by Simon Vestdijk, and *The Dark Room of Damocles* (De donkere kamer van Damocles, 1958) by W.F. Hermans. Vestdijk portrays the members of a resistance group who murder a collaborating Dutchman wrongly suspected of setting fire to a safe house. The motives of the resistance workers are not very noble and they are portrayed as a bunch of amateurs. Coincidence rather than conscious choice determines who collaborates and who does not. In Hermans' novel the insignificant Osewoudt carries out resistance work under the orders of an invisible *doppelgänger*, the officer Dorbeck. After the war, however, when Osewoudt is accused of treason, he is unable to prove



The Girl with Red Hair,
a film by Ben Verbong
(1980).

that Dorbeck ever existed. Osewoudt represents Hermans' view of man and reality. A person's actions are determined by subconscious motives; the wartime situation of fighting and chaos is, in fact, the norm. Truth and ethical values are simply a veneer. The novel is considered to be a high-point of postwar literature and has been made into a film by Fons Rademakers under the title *Dead Ringer* (Twee druppels water, 1963).

The treatment of the theme of good and bad (i.e. non-collaborators and collaborators) is increasingly focusing on the collaborators: what motivated the collaborators, and how bad were they really? Literary writers tried to understand the collaborator long before historians attempted to do so. Literature is proving itself to be a medium within which painful aspects of the war, too, can be explored. *A Lamb to the Slaughter* (Montyn, 1982) is a documentary novel by the author Dirk Ayelt Kooiman, based on conversations with the visual artist Montyn. Montyn, wanting to escape his narrow middle-class environment, serves with the German army and navy and experiences unthinkable horrors. After the war he is unable to adapt to a normal life. He repeatedly gives in to irrepressible urges for adventure, whether it be in wartime Korea, or leading evacuations of children in Vietnam.

Repression, hiding and deportation

The depiction of the fate of those in hiding, and of the deportees, is an important aspect of the war in Dutch literature. Gerard Reve's novel *The Decline and Fall of the Boslowits Family* (De ondergang van de familie Boslowits, 1946) is well-known. Without ever mentioning the word 'Jew', the novel shows how, slowly, almost imperceptibly, but no less effectively, the net closes around a Jewish family. Simon, the first-person narrator, is a friend of the Boslowits family. When war breaks out he hopes it will be an exciting time, but his opinion is radically altered by what happens to the Boslowits family. He hears from Mother Boslowits that acquaintances have committed suicide, that her son is being harassed and that she is no longer allowed to visit her husband in hospital. In vain Simon tries to help by fetching a doctor's letter which states that Father Boslowits is seriously ill. The family is 'taken away' and the father is put in a safe house but commits suicide.

Marga Minco's *Bitter Herbs: A Little Chronicle* (Het bittere kruid, 1957) views events from a Jewish perspective. The central character soberly recounts how members of her family are forced to move house and wear the yellow star, how they receive guidelines for 'the departure' and are taken away. When this happens to her own parents she manages to escape, staying in a succession of safe houses. After the war her uncle waits every day at the tram-stop for the family to return, but she has no such hope. No one will return.

The theme of going into hiding has produced several moving literary works. In his volume of poems *Orpheus and Ahasuerus* (1945) the historian Presser gives an account of how he came to terms with the death of his beloved, who was taken by the Germans. His poetry is an unusually detailed examination of the emotions he experiences: guilt, desire, grief to the point of self-entreaty that it be over, and the deception of control.



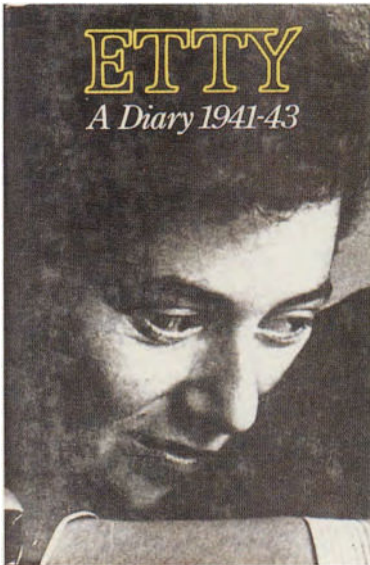
Gerard Reve (1923-) in his young days.

The Diary of Anne Frank (Het achterhuis, 1946) became world famous. In it, Anne tells her imaginary friend Kitty of the claustrophobic atmosphere in their safe house, of the petty arguments, the happy moments; all against the background of the evil historical reality. Andreas Burnier chose a completely different mode of expression in *The Boys' Hour* (Het jongensuur, 1969). In short chapters in which the chronology is reversed, a girl tells of her experiences from the time of going into hiding until the liberation (in the text, the liberation comes first). The child is intellectually precocious, and this means that she has problems adapting. She is surprised by the environments in which she finds herself (traditional Christian and orthodox Marxist): how can they all claim to be right? In Burnier's novel, as in Van Dantzig and Anne Frank, an important sub-theme is developing sexuality, highlighted by the experience of war.

The camps

1981 saw the publication of the wartime diary of Etty Hillesum. Before this, *Two Letters from Westerbork* (Twce brieven uit Westerbork, 1962) had already been published; the complete letters and diaries followed. In her diary Hillesum, in the words of the author of the preface, develops a 'counter-scenario'. Against the background of persecution and destruction a mystical consciousness of the unity of God and man develops in Hillesum, and with it a love of her fellow men, which prompted her decision to heed the summons to Westerbork and to go with her people to their common fate. 'One would like to be a plaster on many wounds' is the last line of her diary. The letters from Westerbork give a disconcerting insight into the transit camp, where many Jews such as Etty Hillesum began their journey to the German death camps. 'Yes, it is true, our last human values are put to the test' she writes, after describing the degrading coagulation of so many human beings in a camp that is too small. In the midst of all the suffering we sometimes hear her mystical consciousness: 'I am not fighting against you, my God, my life is one long dialogue with you.' In September 1943 she and her family were deported to Auschwitz.

The novel *The Night of the Girondists* (De nacht der girondijnen, 1957) by Presser, is set in the Westerbork camp. A few years later, Presser went on to write the important historical account of the destruction of the Jews in the Netherlands, *Ashes in the Wind* (Ondergang, 1965). Here, in *The Night of the Girondists* a young man, Henriques, tells his story while incarcerated in the punishment hut. Via his pupil Georg Cohn, he reports to the Jewish camp supervisor, who is Cohn's father. Supervisor Cohn knows only one law: each week one thousand Jews must be selected for transportation. If he does not do this, someone else will. Henriques goes to work for Cohn, selling his soul to save his skin; he thus becomes familiar with the bewildering world of the camp where, after each week's transportation, a cabaret is performed. His acquaintance with Rabbi Hirsch leads him to realise his moral depravation and accept his Jewishness. As Hirsch is boarding the train, he stumbles. Henriques helps him, thereby revealing himself to Cohn as just like any other Jew and sealing his own fate. The novella contains a great many literary references: the departure of the train is described as a tragedy with five acts, and the camp as Dante's Inferno.



The charming title *A Childhood* (Kinderjaren, 1978) conceals the gruesome experiences of a child in Bergen-Belsen. Jona Oberski depicts deportation, life in a camp, and liberation through the eyes of a small child. A child egged on by the older children to stick out its tongue at the Germans, not realising the danger; a child who is put with the older children after his father's death and, with them, searches for the body of his father among the piles of corpses in the mortuary. It is normal for a child to fight for a place in its peer group, but not amid death and the threat of death. His exhausted mother dies from a contagious disease after the liberation of the camp. Will this child ever be able to lead a normal life again?

One of the poets who chose the Holocaust theme was Maurits Mok, in his collection *Background* (Achtergrond, 1965). In the poem 'Under the skin' ('Onderhuids') the poet tells how the suffering of the Jews haemorrhages inside him 'how they called out in vain, shrank from their own voices until they crawled worm-like over the ground', and how trees, clouds and stars hung silently over their despair.

After the war

Dutch literature and literary life are affected to a large extent not only by the Second World War itself, but also by its aftermath, the process of coming to terms with the trauma of the war, and the effect of this on postwar life. Sometimes controversies arise; as, for example, after the filming of *Bitter Herbs* in 1985. In the film the Jewish main character has a friend whose parents are collaborators. An improper dramatisation? In the eyes of Marga Minco most certainly, but not in the eyes of the filmmakers.

In the late sixties, Friedrich Weinreb caused a stir with his three-volume work *Collaboration and Resistance. An Attempt at Demythologisation* (Collaboratie en verzet. Een poging tot ontmythologisering, 1969). Weinreb is a Jew who, during the war, played what Presser has described as a 'strange and improbable game'. Weinreb compiled lists of Jews who should have been deported, but whose deportation could be avoided because they had a prospect of emigration. The Jewish Council accepted the lists. Weinreb's life is certainly full of improbabilities: arrest, liberation, collaboration with the Germans, and hiding. After the war he was arrested and sentenced for betraying innocent people to the Germans. The writer Renate Rubinstein encouraged him to publish his memoirs. She accepted Presser's interpretation that Weinreb served as a scapegoat for the shortcomings of countless non-Jews. W.F. Hermans argued the opposite case: he judged Weinreb guilty of treachery. The results of a government enquiry support his view. Nevertheless, the memoirs, which balance somewhere between fact and fiction, lies and truth, are an exceptional document.

In 'After 1945' (Na 1945), an autobiographical story in the anthology *Quarantine* (Quarantaine, 1993), Durlacher relates how, on returning to the Netherlands, he is confronted with a barrier of incomprehension on the part of his uncle and aunt, who survived the war. He is not allowed to talk about his experiences in the camps, only the experiences of his aunt and uncle are of interest. In others he senses embarrassment; they had thought him dead. With the help of an understanding notary he finds a room and returns to

school. Only after some time does he dare to visit his parents' home, from which he and they were deported. He is not allowed to go inside. The next-door neighbour is wearing one of his father's suits. Grief and rage well up inside him. He must learn to live a normal life again, although his camp experiences have made complete adjustment impossible. In the title-story 'Quarantine', he is much older and able to revisit the Westerbork camp in an attempt to exorcise the past and be rid of his repressed emotions. The life and work of Durlacher are characterised by a number of Jewish experiences: childhood in Germany under the Hitler regime, escape to the Netherlands, deportation to Auschwitz via Westerbork, and the literary catharsis of those experiences. In the story 'Drowning' (De drenkeling) Durlacher tells how, while on holiday with his parents at Lake Garda, he sees two boys drowning as a storm is building up. He shouts for help but the adults are listening to the noisy loudspeakers. Only the waiter notices, and saves the boys. It is the day on which the Nazis murdered the Austrian Chancellor Dollfuss. The holiday ends in a menacing and threatening atmosphere. In the prologue to the book, 'We Knew Nothing' (Wij wisten van niets), the author goes in search of his former homes in Germany. The inhabitants claim that they knew nothing. The memories of Kristallnacht are still painfully real. But Durlacher concludes: the Germans should have known. They were seduced into barbarities, or watched indifferently. 'And a few courageous ones, such as the waiter Fritz at Lake Garda, save a drowning person from the waves'.

Marga Minco's short novel *The Fall* (De val, 1983) is extremely well written; coincidence and misunderstanding make up the tragedy of Frieda Borgstein. She is to escape with her family to Switzerland, but their helper betrays them: the family walk into a trap. Frieda herself manages to escape: she slips on the stairs while fetching a piece of clothing. For years she keeps the family alive in her imagination, thereby justifying to herself her own existence. When, on her eighty-fifth birthday, she wants to treat the residents of her old people's home, she falls into a hole which, coincidentally, has been left unguarded at that moment. At her funeral, by coincidence, a



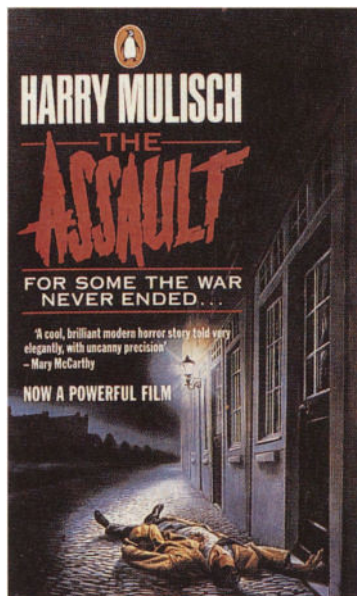
Forged identity card of Marga Minco (with bleached hair!), issued in the name of 'Finkje Kooi'.

civil servant replaces his colleague: it is the helper, who turns out not to have been a traitor: he had himself been betrayed. The flashbacks to the past in Frieda's mind and the build-up of tension are important structural characteristics in this novel.

Neither can the younger generation escape the war. *Night Father* (Tralievader, 1991) is a collection of some forty-odd sketches from the life of a family. The father of that family has been in a concentration camp. Some of the stories are told by the father, talking about the camp. But the author Carl Friedman shows above all how incomprehensible these stories are to the children, how they are affected by them but nevertheless try to understand their father. When his son is spruced up and ready to go to his first dancing lesson, this is a cue for the father to tell another camp story; he had suffered from the cold, and that same son then sat for a long time with his feet in the refrigerator in an attempt to feel what his father had felt. The female narrator is not allowed to join the Guides, as her friend has done, because the Scouts and Guides mixed with members of the Hitler Youth before the war. The father tells stories of cowboys and Indians as if they were the SS acquiring *Lebensraum*. Father has 'got the camp'; that's the way it is and this dominates family life to such an extent that one of his sons exclaims that it would have been better if he had stayed there.

The (impossibility of coming to terms with the) Holocaust is placed in a broader perspective in Leon de Winter's novel *La Place de la Bastille* (1981). The main character Paul de Wit wrestles with his fate as the only surviving member of a Jewish family; one who, moreover, has never known his parents. In coming to terms with this, Paul passes through various phases: suppression of the past, curiosity, daydreams in which he meets his parents, involvement with Israel and psychological instability. A photograph taken in Paris, in which the vague image of someone resembling Paul can be seen, and the fact that Paul may perhaps have a twin brother, lead to strong emotions, desires, dreams and compulsive but unsuccessful attempts to find the twin brother. The failed attempt to give meaning to a past experienced as meaningless has a general application. For Paul it is impossible to place historical facts in a meaningful sequence. History is senseless and without purpose. Important historical facts, such as the founding of Israel, are due to insignificant and coincidental events. It seems impossible to discover the truth, even in one's own life. We are not sure whether Paul really does have a twin brother, or whether the Paris photograph actually shows what Paul sees in it. De Winter's method of continuously giving snippets of information to the reader makes for an exciting novel.

But there are other themes than the Holocaust and its devastating effects to be found in Dutch literature. Much of the work of the writer Armando, who is equally renowned as a visual artist, is devoted to the war. In *The Street and the Bushes* (*De straat en het struikgewas*, 1988), a boy relates his 'autobiography' in a sober and staccato style; he has clearly been influenced by the war in his youth and tries to discover what happened: why the landscape, that witnessed everything, is guilty; why one person is good and another bad; why evil can be so beautiful and fascinating, and what the enemy really looks like. Art provides the only opportunity to undo the forgetting of the past resulting from the advance of time, which destroys everything in its path. In 1967 Armando and Sleutelaar caused a sensation with



the publication of *The ss* (De ss-ers), a series of interviews with Dutch men and women who had voluntarily joined the Waffen-ss.

In Harry Mulisch's successful novel *The Assault* (De Aanslag, 1982) we encounter many themes: it is considered a high point in his work. Mulisch, too, focuses on the problem of guilt and innocence. During the war two resistance fighters kill a collaborating Dutch police officer in front of a certain Mr Korteweg's house. Korteweg is afraid that his reptile collection will be destroyed and moves the body, dragging it in front of the Steenwijk house. He does not put the body in front of his other neighbours's house, where there are Jews in hiding. The Steenwijk house is burned down by the Germans. Only the son, Anton, is eventually spared. On various occasions during his life Anton is confronted with the past. He meets the son of the murdered policeman, the resistance worker who shot the policeman, the girl Korteweg whose father committed suicide out of guilt. Anton is preoccupied with the question who is guilty and who is innocent. Immediately after the war, the answers to such questions were simple and obvious. In later war novels, however, matters are more complicated. There is no definitive and satisfying answer.

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Translated by Yvette Mead.

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